

WILLIAM MURCHISON

Who speaks for Nicaragua?

Bang! The nation will come to order. The Inouye committee is in session, and the topic is Iran-Nicaragua and the lamentable transactions of Ollie North, Spitz Channell, Adm. Poindexter, and as many other Reaganite heavies as can be rounded up.

I can't help asking: Why the hurry? The way things are going, Congress in 12 months' time could conduct something far juicier than a mere investigation — namely, a coroner's inquest.

The question would be: "Who killed democracy in Nicaragua?"

Of course I am probably in the grip of terminal naivete. The finding in any such inquest — were the finding honest — would call for a new cast of culprits.

You would see far fewer fingers pointed at Lt. Col. North and Adm. Poindexter: you would see many more pointed at Sen. Chris Dodd, Democrat of Connecticut; Speaker Jim Wright, Democrat of Texas; and all those Washington luminaries whose opposition to the Contras daily strengthens the only communist regime on the North American mainland.

Yes, considering the circumstances, I suppose it is unreasonable to expect anything like an inquest. More likely is a discreet drawing of curtains.

All the talk on Capitol Hill and in the media is of private fund-raising efforts whose proceeds supposedly helped purchase arms for the democratic resistance in Nicaragua — in contravention of an act of Congress. A leading fund-raiser, Spitz Channell, has pleaded guilty in connec-

tion with the case. Democratic Sen. Daniel Inouye of Hawaii says the president knew more about the matter than up to now he has let on. You see where things are going.

A crucial question is not being asked, or at any rate not being asked with the vigor it deserves.

Let me try. The question is this: How come private sources had to be tapped in the first place to provide aid and succor to the Contras?

The answer: because Congress cut off the Contras' military aid, in the grandest display of irresponsibility seen around Washington, oh, since Congress cut off South Vietnam's military aid.

On "humanitarian" assistance to the Contras, attitudes and votes saw-sawed. However, not until last year, when President Reagan laid on a full-court press, did military aid resume, \$100 million worth. The president has asked Congress to vote a like sum this year.

Before Congress relented on military aid, spokesmen for the world's most powerful nation had to go begging to support American allies fighting at America's doorstep.

The State Department put the arm on the sultan of Brunei. Communist China may have been tapped. Private American citizens were solicited in behalf of the Contras. Many — to their credit — gave generously.

The theoretical purpose of the private-sector fund-raising was humanitarian aid for the freedom fighters: food, clothes, medicine, and so on. The latest allegations have it that much of this money was diverted illegally to buy military equipment.

Should this have happened — if it did happen? Clearly not. But circumvention of the aid ban is not the main issue. The aid ban itself is, or ought to be, the issue.

How in Teddy Roosevelt's name could Congress ever consent to cut adrift a force of pro-American revolutionaries — a force the CIA helped to create?

I have asked myself this question many times. I still don't know the answer.

Where is the American interest in dragging down the Contras and exalting the Sandinistas? Do our fearless leaders want the rest of Central America subverted? How would

they like to see Soviet bases throughout the area?

And what would they suggest doing in that event? Sending Mikhail Gorbachev a protest note?

The conventional reply is that we need to find peaceful means of bringing peace to Nicaragua. What a high-sounding cop-out!

The peace process in Nicaragua, sponsored by neighboring nations, is comatose.

The Sandinistas have no stake in free elections; they would lose such elections. The only way to drag them to the polls is to drain them militarily, awakening them to a sense of their own peril.

The choice in Nicaragua is so clear and distinct that Congress should be able to choose sides in an instant.

On the one hand, the Sandinistas, clients of the Soviet Union, persecutors of democracy and freedom and religion; on the other hand, the

democratic resistance, composed of moderates, conservatives, and even disillusioned leftists, its ranks filled with peasant soldiers — volunteers.

Defeat of the resistance would prove calamitous, not only for long-suffering Nicaragua but for neighbors near and far.

How best to procure that defeat? Just let Congress cut off the Contras' U.S. aid — a strategy with probably a 3-to-1 chance of success. The odds could lengthen by the time the Inouye committee has finished beating up on North & Co.

The president is vigorously counterattacking. "For as long as I am president," he said in a New York City speech, "I have no intention of withdrawing our support for these efforts by the Nicaraguan people to gain their freedom and the right to choose their own national future."

That is the way to talk. But someone has to listen. I do not presently see enough influential Washingtonians listening.

The bang of Sen. Inouye's gavel could easily be mistaken for a hammer pounding nails into a coffin.

William Murchison, associate editor of The Dallas Morning News, is a nationally syndicated columnist.